

Yoga

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: In Indian religions, yoga (from Sanskrit word meaning “yoking” or “joining”) is “the means or techniques for transforming consciousness and attaining liberation (*moksha*) from karma¹ and rebirth (*samsara*).”² It is “a practice by means of which a spiritual seeker strives 1) to control nature to make the soul fit for union with the Oversoul [the true Self; Atman-Brahman; “God”], and 2) to attain union with God and thus the liberation of the soul from the rounds of rebirth and death.”³

Yoga is popularly understood to be a program of physical exercises (*asana*) and breathing exercises (*pranayama*). In the words of one website, yoga “is a program of physical postures designed to purify the body and provide physical strength and stamina required for long periods of meditation.”⁴

Founder(s): Though present in ancient Hindu texts (Upanishads or Vedanta), Yoga was systemized by Patanjali in *Yoga Sutras* (300-200 B.C.). Beginning in the late 19th century, yoga was promulgated in the West by numerous teachers who studied in eastern countries (principally India), many of whom immigrated to America in the early 20th century.

History: Yoga began in India as early as 3000 B.C., according to archeological evidence.⁵ It emerged in the later hymns of the Upanishads [Hindu texts] (600-500 B.C.). It is mentioned in the classic Indian poem *Mahabharata* (c. 400 B.C.-400 A.D.) and discussed in the most famous part of that poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Having been well established in Indian culture, yoga was systematized by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras* (300-200 B.C.). Patanjali defined the purpose of yoga as knowledge of the true Self [God] and outlined eight steps for direct experience of Self (see below).

Yoga, as practiced and taught in India, entered the Western world in the 19th century with the translation of basic yogic texts. Following attendance at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Swami⁶ Vivekananda introduced yoga to the U.S. He lectured widely on the practice, founded the Vedanta Society, and authored many books. In the 20th century numerous versions of yoga were developed and taught. Among influential teachers who promoted yoga in the U.S. were names such as the following: Baba Bharati Premanand, William Atkinson (an American whose pen name was Swami Ramacharaka), Pierre Bernard (introduced tantric yoga to the U.S.), Theos Bernard, Pundit Acharya, Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (founded Temple of Yoga, Yoga Research Institute, and Prana Press), Shri Yogendra (taught hatha yoga and founded Yogashrama, the Yoga Institute of America; promoted natural health). Numerous books aided the growth of a yoga practicing community in the U.S.

In the 1950s “an almost faddish burst of interest in hatha yoga” occurred in the U.S. During the decade yoga spread through health and beauty salons.⁷ Indian teachers

¹ Karma is the Hindu teaching that every action has a consequence, affecting this life or the future life—morally good acts having positive consequences, bad acts having negative results.

² John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1058.

³ Brad Scott, “Exercise or Religious Practice? YOGA,” *The Watchman Expositor* Vol. 18, No. 2 (2001): 13.

⁴ www.yogajournal.com/newtoyoga/820_1.cfm

⁵ The historical summary here is based on information contained in the article on “Yoga” in J. Gordon Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), 501-507.

⁶ “Swami” or “Svami” is the Hindu term of respect for a “holy man” or “teacher.”

⁷ *Time* magazine reported in 2001 that 75% of U.S. health clubs offer classes in yoga. See Richard Corliss, “The Power of Yoga,” *Time* (April 23, 2001): 56-62.

immigrated to the U.S. during this period, founding centers (e.g., Yogi Bhausaheb Maharaj New York Center) and publishing books that helped to popularize the movement. The most popular American teacher in the 50s was Richard Hittleman, who published 15 books, recorded several records, and introduced hundreds of thousands to hatha yoga and its spiritual (Hindu religious foundations) and meditative techniques. Following the U.S.'s revision of immigration laws in 1965, a new wave of yoga teachers entered the country. In 1966 B.K.S. Iyengar published *Light on Yoga*, a comprehensive volume still used. Yoga rapidly expanded in the 1970s, with the founding of numerous yoga centers and professional associations. Yoga became especially popular among adherents of New Age ideas.

Texts: Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*; *Vashita Yoga*; *Bhagavad Gita*

Beliefs and Practices

Many people in the U.S. today claim to practice yoga primarily for its health benefits, without consciously adopting Hindu religious perspectives that underlie the practice and usually become apparent in more advanced stages of instruction. Elementary courses focus on physical exercises consisting of various postures and breathing techniques. The set of physical exercises taught in these classes is called "hatha yoga." Depending on the level of yoga being taught and on the religious perspective of the instructor, yoga classes may seek to promote mental and physical health by introducing people to metaphysical or philosophical teachings having Hindu origin. The purpose of hatha yoga, according to one source, is "to locate and activate the cakras (centres of energy) and thus to raise the kundalini (dormant spiritual power) to life. It works especially through bodily postures (asana) and control of breath (pranayama), uniting the *ha* (breath of the sun) with *tha* (breath of the moon)."⁸

Underlying Western versions of yoga being taught⁹ is the Hindu belief that within humans exists centers of physic or spiritual energy called *chakras* (Sanskrit for "wheel"). The purpose of yoga is to enable a person to control and move the force or power (kundalini; also called *prana*) residing in the lowest chakra or energy hub at the base of the spine up through a channel to the highest level, and ultimately to a state of salvation called *moksha*. *Moksha* is a state of liberation from the cycle of rebirth or reincarnation and the law of karma (the law of consequence to every action).¹⁰ "The ultimate goal of yoga is to attain for the human soul its definitive union with the world soul"¹¹ or "God"—by whatever name he may be known. Some descriptions of yoga speak of the "eight limbs" of yoga, with the ultimate goal being *samadhi* (liberation, spiritual enlightenment) or "total absorption in the Godhead."¹² "Yoga techniques suggest eight stages for attaining perfect control of the body: restraint against harming living creatures; self discipline involving internal control and calmness; body postures that facilitate concentration of the mind; regulation of breath; control of the senses to shut out the outside world; focused concentration on a single object; meditation; and the final trance in which the yogi becomes one with Brahman."¹³

Yoga practitioners commonly insist that yoga is not a religion, but they do not hesitate to describe it as a spiritual practice or "life-giving aspect" in the "move into spirituality."

⁸*The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 415.

⁹Most popular books on yoga exercises contain introductory material presenting the philosophy underlying the program.

¹⁰ Morten Aagaard, "Elementary Yoga," *Update and Dialog* (June 1992): 7-11.

¹¹ A. R. Victor Raj, *The Hindu Connection* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 67. A "yogi" is "someone who is well advanced in the various techniques of the discipline." A "guru" is a yoga teacher of religious knowledge. *Ibid.*

¹²Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1970), 16, cited by Scott, "Exercise or Religious Practice?", 12; see www.yogajournal.com/newtoyoga/820_1.cfm, and also Scott, 5.

¹³Raj, 68. *Time* magazine describes "The Mystical" side of yoga as follows: "Enlightenment and good health require the free flow of the life force (*prana*) and the proper balance between the seven major energy hubs (*chakras*). (An eighth chakra, or aura, surrounds the body and encompasses the other seven.) The three lower chakras serve the body's physical needs, while the five upper charkas are associated with the spiritual realm." Richard Corliss, "The Power of Yoga," 61.

Yoga can even accelerate “spiritual awakening,” it is claimed.¹⁴ Teachers and students often greet each other with a Sanskrit word “*Namaste*” meaning “I honor the Divine within you”¹⁵ and sometimes recite *mantras* (ritual chants¹⁶) that—often unknown to yoga students—contain specifically religious content. While many practice yoga for its health benefits, it is predicted that they “will...come to see yoga as a spiritual practice.”¹⁷

As an expression of spirituality, yoga usually contains the following religious elements or assumptions:

- Religious syncretism (a combining or mixing of conflicting religious teachings)¹⁸
- Universalism (all believe in the same “God,” but take different paths to reach him/her/it)¹⁹
- Pantheism (“God” or “Divinity” as a force or energy is *in* all things)²⁰
- Belief in the innate goodness of man²¹
- Salvation or perfection through religious self-exertion²²
- Reincarnation or rebirth (passing through lifetimes in the effort to overcome the law of karma).
- Salvation or liberation through achievement of higher knowledge and consciousness.²³

Some attempts have recently been made to introduce a “Christian” practice of yoga, infusing Christian truths and practices (e.g., meditation and prayer) into exercise classes.²⁴

A Lutheran Response

In the words of Martin Luther, Lutherans confess that “God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them.”²⁵ Lutherans understand the Bible to teach that human beings as whole persons—body, mind and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23)—are the handiwork of their Creator (Psalm 139) and the objects of His love and care (Psalm 145:8-16). With gratitude to God, Christians look upon their mind and body as a precious gift entrusted to them for the maintenance and promotion of good health and personal well-being—for glory to

¹⁴Phil Catalfo, “Is Yoga a Religion?”, *Yoga Journal* (March/April 2001): 83. Fernando Pages Ruiz, “Don’t Know Much Philosophy?”, *Yoga Journal* (March/April 2001): 146.

¹⁵ Alan Reder, “Reconcilable Differences,” *Yoga Journal* (March/April 2001): 80-81.

¹⁶In Hinduism, “Mantras are words or phrases with magical power that enable the worshipper to rise above earthly surroundings and become immersed in the world of Brahman [the most original and popular being OM, ‘the mysterious sound of eternity’]. Mantras elevate the meditating soul from the world of sound and fury to the sphere of silence and serenity.” Raj, 66. *Time* has reported on a yogic chant called “kirtan” that has become popular “with audiences eager for spiritual experiences.” Kirtan is “devotional chanting, which originated as a component of the religious form of yoga known as Bhakti and is conducted by call and response.” Michele Orecklin, “Can You Sing Om?”, *Time* (October 6, 2003):62. For an extensive discussion of the occultic aspects of yoga, see John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 593-610.

¹⁷Catalfo, 83.

¹⁸Yoga practitioner Alan Reder seeks to show that “a Buddhist, A Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim share how they blend yoga with their religious beliefs.” Reder 79.

¹⁹ Brad Scott calls attention to the Sanskrit dictum “as many faiths, so many paths.” Scott’s former guru assured him that “all faiths lead to God (*even* Christianity...)” Scott, 7.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹“This way they [Benedictine monks] could see that both yoga and Christian philosophies agree we are innately good and connected to something divine.” Ruiz, 144.

²²*Ibid.*, 7-8.

²³“The yogi masters mind, senses, and body to transcend them, blasting upward through the top-most chakra, the ‘thousand-petaled lotus,’ on his way to Cosmic Consciousness...**pure** existence, consciousness, and bliss...union with the One.” *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴For example, see Renée LaReau, “Tuesdays with Father Yogi,” *National Catholic Reporter* (September 9, 2005): 14-15. See also an online *Christianity Today* article on a Christian version called “PraiseMoves” (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2005/002/14.40.html>) and the lively exchange that ensued (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/120/42.0.html>; <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/123/22.0.html>)

²⁵*Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 13.

Him and service to the neighbor. Accordingly, programs of physical exercise and health-promoting mental pursuits—especially in view of the stress and tensions of modern life—are to be affirmed and encouraged.

Christians may think that yoga is a purely physical and mental discipline for the purposes of bodily health and relaxation. However, they need to be keenly aware of the fact that yoga has its roots in, and is integrally related to, Eastern philosophical systems (especially Hinduism) that conflict with Christianity. And especially since yoga is very often taught and practiced for the express purpose of offering spiritual enlightenment and growth, Christians need to exercise extreme caution. They need to recognize the dangers of accepting a given practice as necessarily good merely because they think “it works” (pragmatism). Christians should avoid yoga classes that integrate religious assumptions such as those highlighted above, holding firmly to what God’s Word teaches regarding these elements. The following biblical truths need to be kept in mind:

- Christians, in whom God’s Holy Spirit dwells, are commanded to avoid the mixture of biblical truth with pagan beliefs (2 Cor. 6:14-18).
- Jesus taught that the only path to life and salvation is through faith in Him (John 14:6; Acts 4:14; 1 Tim. 2:5).
- The true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—created the heavens and earth, preserving and ruling over all things. He is separate from and above the creation (transcendent), not one with it or identical to it as some force or power (Genesis 1-2; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:10-12; Is. 42:5; etc.)
- Human beings by nature are spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God because of the fall into sin—not innately good (Genesis 3; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:1; Rom. 8:7).
- “For by grace you have been saved through faith [in Jesus Christ]. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works [human effort]...” (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Spiritual enlightenment or knowledge comes only through Jesus Christ (John 1:19), who sends the Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who believe in Jesus (John 14).
- Humans are born and die once before the final judgment of God comes (Heb. 9:27).
- Salvation and liberation come to a person only through faith in Jesus Christ, who is proclaimed in the good news of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16; 1 Thess. 5:9; Tit. 2:11).

For Further Reading

- Ankerberg, John and John Weldon. “Yoga,” in *Encyclopedia of New Age Belief*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996. (593-610)
- Bowker, John, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. (1058-59)
- Chopra, Deepak. *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Yoga*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004.
- Melton, J. Gordon. “Yoga,” in *New Age Encyclopedia*. Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1990. (500-509)
- Raj, A. R. Victor. *The Hindu Connection: Roots of New Age*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994. (see esp. 62-86)
- Scott, Brad. “Exercise or Religious Practice? YOGA.” *The Watchman Expositor* Vol 18, No. 2 (2001): 5-13.
- Yoga Journal*, March/April 2001.

Links and Websites

- www.yogajournal.com/newtoyoga/820_1.cfm
- <http://www.watchman.org/na/vogaoverview.htm>
- <http://esutra.blogspot.com/2005/06/christians-debate-yoga.html>